

# *Sketch*

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## A Bell-Mare

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# A Bell-Mare

Daniel Doran

## **Abstract**

I lost my name today. Well, strictly speaking I didn't really lose it, I tied it up and left it in my glove compartment. It struggled for a while, resorted to tears, but finally broke loose and fell free, submitting to the cold squareness with all the broken dignity of a shamed politician...

# A Bell-Mare

*by*  
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*JLMC 3*

I lost my name today.

Well, strictly speaking I didn't really *lose* it, I tied it up and left it in my glove compartment.

It struggled for a while, resorted to tears, but finally broke loose and fell free, submitting to the cold squareness with all the broken dignity of a shamed politician.

I feel better for it.

With that label in bondage my heart grows lighter with each upward step and the sun bakes opaque-enamelled sheets of forgetfulness between me and all the pain wrapped up in that all-American appellation.

So I climb along with no name. No past. And I'm not all that rare.

There are lots of us.

Really.

\* \* \*

I'm heading up a mountain.

It's that easy. I've never done this before and I probably won't do it again, but for right now, in this time and this place, it is exactly the right thing to be doing.

There is that scent they always talk about, a thick musk from decaying pine, wet rocks, mold. This should stir some animal instinct in me, my blood should warm with a return to the primal mother and my spirit should soar with the eagle to the craggy peaks.

What bullshit, I'm tired already.

But why not? There's nothing else to be doing right now that would make any more sense. There is nothing ahead, just as surely as there is nothing behind or to either side.

So what do I want?

Not to be down there with them.

That's something at least.

Darkness is falling. (Falling?)

I'll fall with it in gratitude and gentle relief. There has to be a time for remembering, some part of the day reserved for the past. For me it's when the harsh, undeniable sunlight fades to a filtering gray haze that blends all things real and definable with that fringe-layer lunacy of twilight.

Memories fit here. Misty longings and nerve-raw souvenirs of love and loss grow real as the rest of the world slips into that blessed abstraction of darkness.

Ghosts walk here.

I've seen them.

\* \* \*

One's been following me today. I could hear him laughing gently every time I stumbled on a rock or slipped beneath the unaccustomed weight of my pack. He's coming up the trail now, I can see the vapor in the cold night air as his breathing keeps time with his steady pace. His thumbs are hooked through the pack straps and there is a smile on his face. It's an interesting thing, that smile. It's not the kind of smile that comes when you think of something funny that happened that day or the smile you get when you think of something embarrassing and wish you could do it differently but you can't so you smile it off, a wry smile. No, it's not either of those smiles or any others that I know. But it *is* a smile.

Or should it be was?

I think maybe he's smiling because his brother keeps asking him why in the hell he spends so much time doing exactly what he's doing right now and always *will* do no matter what.

Or should it be *would* do?

I don't know.

\* \* \*

There aren't any stars out tonight, and that is probably proper, though I wouldn't know how one determines the properness of such things. There probably isn't any way and I'll spend valuable time thinking and wondering about that

which has no solution and and shouldn't have a solution and never *will* have a solution no matter how hard I think about it.

I've strung up a tent across the middle of the trail.

It's too rocky here for a tent and the trail slopes downhill but I really don't care where I sleep. I'm too tired.

The ghost just walked right through my tent.

It didn't bother him much. He just walked right through and stopped on the other side and picked up a small rock and wiped it off on his shirt and looked at it and then stuck it in his pocket and walked on up the trail out of sight like the pack he was wearing was filled with feathers or air, and like he wouldn't walk back down the mountain soon and twist himself into something completely different made of steel and blood and broken upholstery.

\* \* \*

I've tried three times to start a fire and I'll be damned if there is anything on this mountain that will burn. I tried twigs and pine needles and leaves and I even wadded up part of my map and burned it under a pile of logs, and nothing, not one decent blaze. It really doesn't matter, the air is chilly but not that bad.

I can smell ghostly wisps of smoke from up the trail and meat sizzles somewhere warm that I'll never be.

At least I'm not down there, that's something.

The preacher said, "This should be a time for rejoicing! We all must cast aside our worldly bodies for our heavenly spirit."

I felt like throwing up. I also felt like leaving.

I did.

\* \* \*

I won't go back for a while. This mountain meant something special to him. I never knew what or why. I guess I never really went out of my way to find out what or why. He'd even asked me to go once.

I didn't.

And he never made excuses. He didn't say, "Maybe I'll go for a hike up on Mt. Baker tomorrow." He didn't say, "Maybe I'll do some backpacking on the mountain next weekend, kinda get away from it all." He didn't say, "I think I'll do some hunting up on Baker today, I feel lucky." He didn't say any of those things and most of all he didn't say goodbye.

So now here I am and I wonder why.

(Why?)

\* \* \*

I'm trying. I'm trying. I can take it all, I can take it all but I can't turn my face, I even know it's coming but I can't turn my face on I-27 for a stain; a big, dark concrete stain.

It's the only way to the mountain.

\* \* \*

Those of us who don't have names don't have stains either.

I wonder what it would be like not to have a name on a permanent basis. If I could lose the key to my glove compartment and all anyone would ever call me is whatever they had on their mind at that particular moment and I could be a friend, almost a lover, with everyone I met.

I could be a mirror for them that would never break and never be forgotten.

\* \* \*

A few moments ago there was a ringing.

I had been asleep for a long time and the ringing entered my dreams like a surprise guest on the Tonight Show. Johnny was interviewing some actor with big teeth and on walks the Bob Hope of my dreams to the tune of a sound-colored silver bell.

I wake to see mist around my tent, around everything, and the ringing cuts through the mist like a diamond chisel. I wait in my little tent and listen to the silver ringing say

beautiful things to the mist that just smiles and blushes before pushing away its hand. There's a beat to the ringing now; no they're footsteps, hoofsteps, that's it. There's a head and then a horse and the bell-mare paces the trail toward me and stops at the tent where her beautiful little dapple-grey bell stops too.

"Hello!" (Me, not her.)

She starts and cocks her head to one side to see if this lump of green stuff in the trail is really talking.

"Good morning!"

She jumps again and backs up a few steps. (Reverse ringing.) Snickering to the rest of the herd that I can hear milling down the trail she cuts off into the forest to give me a wide berth. For a while I can hear the rest of the herd stomping through the brush as they circle around me and then they are gone.

I guess I can't blame them.

I'd do the same.

\* \* \*

The sun burns away the mist as I gather up my tent and all my belongings.

There are clouds gathering in the west and the wind is blowing harder today than yesterday. I've come far enough up the mountain now that I can no longer tell it's a mountain. Like so many things, its peak disappears as you approach it.

The clouds are closer here. From this height I can see them very clearly and they look like a million things anyone could think of if they just had the time. Think of something and that's how they looked, but all piled up.

The trail looks even steeper up ahead and I can tell the bell-mare came this way by all the manure I keep stepping on. We who have no real names don't mind if we step in manure. Give us a chance and we'll walk in shit all day as long as we're alone.

It suits us fine.

\* \* \*

It's rough now.

I have to stop and rest often and my lungs complain about too many years of easy living. Scraggly dwarves gasp for air along with me and beg for transplanting — fat chance.

There is a slow death here, a strangling for lack of that which maintains us all, stumpy grasses and twisted trees.

Little whitened bones of some sort of creature lie along the trail and I try to find some proper way of thinking about that skeleton and life and death and me, but I don't try very hard. In the daylight it is much easier not to think about these things and just climb and use muscles I've never used before and go places I've never been before.

\* \* \*

It's raining. As I hunch my neck against the wetness and make that final climb that leads me to the top I can see that Mt. Baker was a volcano once.

From the rim where I stand I can see a huge scoop of green that has to be a crater. From my feet the lip of the crater stretches for miles in a perfect circle, enclosing a small jewel-like lake in its center that is framed yet again by a circle of drinking horses.

There is a path that cuts through the rim like a chip in a teacup and I follow it down until I have to shed my pack and slide on my butt under a huge, overhanging rock.

When I land at the base of the rock I can see a small covered canyon with a creek that feeds the crater's lake. There are rocks choking the entrance but beyond this the canyon is green from the afternoon sun and inviting in its dryness.

From the start I can see markings on the far wall and as I get closer I can see a big stain of pigment on the stone face that becomes a buffalo charging toward the lake as a group of stick men sink spears in its side. The moon and sun oppose each other with faces of light and darkness as rainclouds drop dots and dashes of life onto fields of maize.

\* \* \*



I spent the afternoon there, exploring. There were piles of pottery and flint chips near the creek and I ate lunch on the spot where thousands of years ago men sat and watched their horses drink from the crater's lake, just as I sat and watched the bell-mare's herd.

The rain is stopping and as I leave this spot I see something else.

One other thing.

There is a perfect ring of stones, smoke-black. I touch them and my finger stains fresh soot and I know who and now why and there really isn't any solving some things, just finding what you can and keeping it sacred for yourself.

I turn and beyond me the perfect circle of the crater frames a ragged sky and from the ring of horses at the center a dapple-grey steps off to graze as a sound-colored silver rises gently to meet me.



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